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III.—FICTION AS A COLLEGE STUDY.

A good deal has been said, in recent years, about the importance of prose fiction. The vogue which the modern novel undoubtedly enjoys, its immediate and unquestionable influence over multitudes of readers, has contributed much to the prevalent impression as to the value of fiction, yet a more significant factor has been the increasing self-consciousness of fiction writers. They seem to feel a distinct assurance that at last they are going to get seats nearer the head of the table. Compared with the solemnity with which they discuss in public the responsibilities laid upon practitioners of their art, Harry Fielding's prefaces about his stern duty as a historian of human nature seem frivolous indeed. If this conviction of the greatness of the art were producing, or tending to produce, greater artists, one could scarcely quarrel with it, but among the day's distinguished names the great artists are unfortunately as few as ever. Wide-spread as is the present interest in fiction, it is at least debatable whether the English novel is much more intrinsically important, when compared with other types of literature, or even when tested by the proportion of fiction to the entire literary output, than it has been at a half dozen other periods in the last two hundred years.

Nevertheless, though the gain in quality and quantity of fiction in English is often exaggerated, it is true that the importance of the novel is indisputable, and this importance is not lessened by the fact that the novel did not win its place in literature yesterday or the day before. The study of fiction in preparatory schools and colleges is a recognition, though a somewhat tardy one, of the value of the art. It attests the significance of the mass of observations, thoughts and feelings which that art has recorded for us, and indirectly gives witness to the desire of teachers of English to bring their work

into relation with life, to make it bear upon the actual reading and thinking of their pupils. Wherever courses in fiction have been made a part of the college curriculum, they have attracted the interest of students, and to some extent the notice of outsiders. These courses are altogether likely to be maintained, and probably increased in number in the immediate future. At any rate, they have carried the experiment of teaching fiction sufficiently far to justify one or two observations upon its educational value.

In the first place, when contrasted with other types of imaginative literature, such as poetry and the drama, prose fiction has for many pupils the virtue of more readily stimulating the attention. That attention is the basis of any successful mental effort the common sense of teachers and the experimental psychologists agree in affirming. A chapter of first-rate fiction arrests a boy's attention at countless points; it provokes his interest, awakens his curiosity, challenges comparison with his own experiences, quickens his flagging intentness by the constant shifting of focus within the field of mental vision, and even while it is energizing his imagination, concentrates it. Poetry touches a boy at a higher level, it is true,—provided it touches him at all,—yet though fiction “finds” him upon a lower level, it has the advantage of finding him at more points. Its appeal is more universal; it captivates the youth who cares mainly for facts, as well as the youth whose heart is set on fancies. Poetry is a finer art than fiction, but for that very reason there are many undergraduates who cannot come under the domination of poetry. They have no natural ear for its music, and at twenty or twenty-two they find themselves or think themselves too old to learn the notes. But the scope of prose fiction is so vast, it is so varied in its different provinces, its potency to attract and to impress is so indubitable, that the undergraduate who makes no intellectual response to it, whose powers may not be developed by means of it, must be insufferably dull.

In the second place, the educational value of fiction consists not merely in its content, in the significance of the ideas which it conveys to the mind, but also to a considerable extent in the form in which those ideas are clothed. In the best fiction that form is singularly perfect. The study of expression as such, the cultivation of the feeling for style, is inseparably associated with a well selected course in fiction. The special treatises in narration and description, for instance, which many teachers of rhetoric are now using, draw their readiest and aptest illustrations from the novelists. The range of expression, the force and beauty with which ideas are uttered by the masters of English fiction, is unquestionable. It is hard to see how any college boy can come away from a close study of Thackeray or Hawthorne, without a new appreciation of form, a standard of workmanship; without learning once for all that imagination and passion may co-exist with a sense of proportion, with purity of feeling, with artistic reserve. These last are what we agree to call the classic qualities. We send boys to Greek and Latin literature in the hope that they will catch something of the secret of them, but if boys cannot or will not read Greek and Latin, they need not necessarily be unfamiliar with works composed in the classic spirit. In a time like ours, when everybody writes "well enough," and few try to write perfectly, it is no small thing that college students may be taught through fiction to perceive the presence of style, the stamp of distinction. That sound Latinist and accomplished musician, Henry Nettleship, wrote once to a friend a passage about Wagner which is not without its bearing upon literature. "Wagner tries to make music do what it cannot do without degrading itself—namely, paint out in very loud colours certain definite feelings as they arise before the composer. The older musicians seem to me to aim rather at suggesting feeling than at actually exhibiting it, as it were, in the flesh. I think much of Wagner would vitiate my taste, *but perhaps my head is too full of the older music* to take in strains to which my nerves are not attuned." Professor

Nettleship may have been right or wrong about Wagner, but is there a better service which the teacher of fiction can render a pupil, than to make his head so full of the noble cadences of Scott and Thackeray, Eliot and Hawthorne, that there shall be no room there for what has been succinctly described as "the neurotic, the erotic, and the Tommyrotic," and all the other contemporary varieties of meretricious and ignoble art?

The methods to be followed in the college study of fiction depend naturally upon the size and proficiency of the classes, the extent to which the lecture system is adopted, the library facilities, the temperament and training of the individual teacher. At the same time there are certain general modes of instruction between which a choice must be made at the outset. For instance, the English novel may be treated historically. Its origins and the main tendencies of its development are not difficult to trace, and a course of lectures and required reading may thus be laid out without departing from the sequence of history. The advantages of following the historical method in studying the literature of a particular people are too obvious to be insisted upon, but after all, so far as fiction is concerned, this method is not without its drawbacks. Very few college libraries contain much material dating back of the middle of the eighteenth century, or representing more than a handful of novelists from that time to the time of Scott. Even were the material at hand, the temptation in dealing with minor fiction of a past generation is to content oneself with second-hand opinion, and it is precisely this indolent fashion of handing along a received opinion which used to bring the teaching of English literature into disrepute. A pupil must get the books into his hand—how often does that need to be said—if he is to receive much benefit from his professor's deliverances about them. Of course a boy who studies English fiction at all ought to know something of the lines of its progress in the past,—say as much as Professor Raleigh's little book on *The English Novel* will help him to acquire,—but whether anything more than such a general sketch as is there

attempted, can be successfully presented under ordinary classroom and library conditions, is doubtful. With advanced students and adequate library apparatus, investigation of the historical development of fiction will naturally take care of itself.

Again, the direct criticism of contemporary fiction has been proved to be attractive and stimulating. Such a method of instruction takes pupils where they are, endeavors to make them clear as to their own preferences, traverses the immense field of latter-day fiction, and selects for analysis and judgment striking examples of this and that literary tendency. From the standpoint of pedagogy, much may be said for this method, which has its foundation in an interest already present, which requires little or no preparation on the student's part, and which puts the teacher on a level with his pupils, man to man, forcing him to see more truly and to express himself more clearly than they, upon books that have not yet won a permanent place in literature and consequently have not become a part of the professorial stock-in-trade. Nevertheless the method has its dangers. It may tempt the teacher to popularize, in the bad sense; to say cleverer things than the newspapers are saying about the novel which happens to be the latest "fad;" to recognize in his choice of current fiction the market valuation and thus to impress the market value standard upon the very young men who most need to be taught the fallibility of that standard. It certainly tempts the student to criticize,—that is, to perform the most delicate of mental operations,—before he is in possession of any canons of criticism; it tempts him to mistake literary gossip for literary culture. Furthermore, it does not follow because a young fellow likes to read *Trilby*—let us say—that the analysis of the essence of Trilbiness is the best task that can be assigned him. The English historian's famous sneer, upon the proposition to introduce courses in English literature at the universities, was that the study of Shelley would end in men being coached in "the Harriet problem." But the Harriet

problem is innocent and edifying material for the class-room, compared with the themes of some of the most widely-read English novels of the past five years. If these books are to be discussed at all, they should be discussed frankly, but the teacher's desk gains nothing in dignity by being turned into a clinic one day and a pulpit the next. If a man thinks he can teach literature, then, for his pupils' sake, as well as his own, he should stick to his trade. Finally, this emphasis upon contemporary fiction reinforces a tendency among undergraduates which needs correction rather than encouragement. These young fellows are so contemporaneous already as to be the despair of their friends. Most of them have about as much sense of perspective as a Sunday paper. Their memories scarcely reach beyond *Treasure Island*. It is therefore advisable for them to discover that good style did not begin with Stevenson, and that plot development is somewhat older than Conan Doyle. Fascinating as is the criticism of contemporary novels in the classroom, a course of fiction-study might nevertheless be arranged which should fulfil every reasonable requirement, and still meet the test which the late Dr. Shedd is said to have applied to his last volume of theology. "It's good," he is reported to have exclaimed earnestly; "it's good; there isn't a modern thing in it."

While every method has no doubt the defects of its qualities, it seems to me, as the result of more or less experiment, that the method least open to objection is that which, assuming that prose fiction is an art, devotes itself to the exposition of the principles of that art. It takes for granted that there is a "body of doctrine" concerning fiction, as there is concerning painting or architecture or music, and that the artistic principles involved are no more incapable of formulation than are the laws of the art of poetry, as expressed in treatises upon Poetics from Aristotle's day to our own. They are indeed largely the same principles, as might be expected in the case of two sister arts. A student cannot begin the study of prose fiction more profitably than by endeavoring to grasp the rela-

tions between this art and the art of narrative poetry. Quite aside from the task of tracing historically the process by which the prose romance grew out of the epic, there are rich fields for investigation in connection with such topics as the material common to the two arts, the qualities shared by the novelist and poet, and the similarity of much of their craftsmanship in the sphere of formal expression. This suggests a study of their differences in the selection of material, their varying attitude toward their material, and the diverging requirements of effective expression in the two media of prose and verse. Then the affiliations of fiction with the drama must be made clear, through a study of such questions as the general similarity in construction of the novel and the play, and the advantages and disadvantages of substituting the novelist's indirect methods of narration and description for the direct representation of action by means of the stage. Here the student may work out, in a comparatively new territory, the familiar principle of Lessing, and assure himself that the real field of the novelist is forever separated from that of the dramatist by the nature of the artistic media which the two men employ. No professor who has the yearly experience of teaching fiction to classes made up in part of men who have studied poetics and the drama and in part of men who have not, will be likely to undervalue such preliminary study. The student may well be asked, also, to estimate the bearing upon fiction of the modern scientific movement,—remembering Lanier's remark about the novel being the meeting-ground of poetry and science,—and endeavoring to ascertain whether upon the whole fiction has gained or lost by its contact with the scientific spirit. After such a clearing of the ground as has been suggested, it is natural to pass to a detailed study of the content of fiction, a study, that is, of character, plot, and setting, in themselves and as inter-related. Selecting for classroom material some novels that have stood the test of time, methods of character-delineation must be observed; stationary and developing characters compared; the relation of main and

subordinate characters noted. The nature of tragic and comic collisions must be analysed ; the infinitely varied ways of tangling and untangling the skein of plot reduced to some classification that can be grasped by the student. The circumstances or events enveloping the action of the story—whether it be set in some focal point of history or merely keyed to a quiet landscape,—must be accurately perceived. Setting and plot and character, whether analysed separately or grasped in their artistic relations to one another, must further be discussed in connection with the personality of the fiction writer. Pupils should be taught to look for the mark of personality, not in gossip about a novelist's hour of rising and favorite breakfast and favorite books, but rather in connection with the creative processes upon which the stamp of personality is really set. The pupil must be asked to hunt realism and romanticism to their lair in the mind of the artist. He must ask himself what is actually meant by those glib catch-words of criticism—those baffling pairs of words "real and ideal," "fact and truth," "individual and type," "nature and art." Finally he must study the way in which differences in the nature of material and differences in personality have resulted in the leading forms of fiction, and how these forms are capable of infinite modification, so that there is no end to possible investigation of matters of technic and style.

After some such equipment as I have briefly indicated, the student may profitably pass to the criticism of contemporary authors, if he pleases, or to some phase of the history of the novel. I should not wish to depreciate either of those methods of study, but nevertheless it seems to me that the most important thing to be learned about fiction at the outset is the knowledge of what fiction normally is ; a sense of what it can do and what it cannot do ; a recognition of the fact that in the most insignificant short story may be seen the play of laws as old as art itself ; that Aristotle and Lessing, in short, wrote with one eye on Kipling and Hardy. It is true that there is in some quarters a suspicion of the professor of *belles*

lettres, with his academic rule and line, and his reverence for Aristotle and the unities. But in the present stage of college instruction in fiction it is better to err on the side of formalism than of anarchy, better to be a doctrinaire than to set up idols of the market-place.

I have endeavored to point out the existence of a "body of doctrine" concerning fiction. To formulate the group of facts and laws which constitutes this "body of doctrine," and to impress it upon a college class, is a task worthy of a teacher's best efforts. For the vast fiction-reading public into which these classes are so soon to merge is sceptical about the very existence of standards of judgment. "It is not that there is so little taste nowadays," said someone the other day, "there is so much taste; most of it bad." Nevertheless this lawless and inconstant public, craving excitement at any price, journalized daily, neither knowing nor caring what should be the real aim and scope of the novel, has the casting vote, after all, upon great books and little books alike. From its ultimate verdict there is no appeal. It is therefore no small service to literature that the colleges perform, when they send into this public, to serve as leaven, men who know good work from bad, and who know why they know it.

BLISS PERRY.